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ABSTRACT

The relationship between Hmong refugees, immigration policies, and the United States educational system is examined. First, the immigration process and policy development are discussed. Federal intentions toward the Hmong refugees and the educational reality are then contrasted, and the reasons for policy failure are examined. It is contended that the encounter between the Hmong and the educational system may be regarded as a case study of the inherent inability of the system to accommodate differentness and to respond to the real need of newly-arrived refugees. The schools failed to reach across a substantial cultural gap and provide access to the larger society, attempting instead to hurry the Hmong into adjusting to a substitute culture radically different from any they had known before. The educational system has failed to keep Hmong adults enrolled and has not made available comprehensive preparation of this population for the labor market. It is argued that a better educational policy would require that authorities embrace a pluralistic vision of U.S. society and reorient policies accordingly. A 10-item bibliography is included. (Author/MSE)

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HMONG REFUGEES AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY

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This paper regards the encounter between Hmong refugees, immigration policy and the U.S. educational system as a study of the capacity of the educational system for accomodating student differences and for responding to newly arrived refugee students. It documents the extreme case of the Hmong refugees in terms of language, culture, and ethnicity. This study highlights the inherent failings and incapacities of the educational system.

The Hmong, a closely-knit agricultural tribal people, have lived in hilly regions of Laos. These regions in Laos are as distant, culturally as well as geographically, as possible from their settlement in the U.S. Their language has recently been provided with an alphabet, but few Hmong are literate.

Beginning in the mid 1970's sixty thousand Hmong--probably a majority of them-- were airlifted to the United States. They came not to join families, or to supply skills the U.S. needed, or because they had become enamored of some version of the American Dream--the standard reasons for immigration. Their arrival here was a consequence of U.S. military ventures in the Indochina War. The Hmong had been recruited by the CIA to serve as mercenaries against rebel forces in that region (Kourman, 1979; Catlin and Beck, 1981). After the rebels won, the Hmong had to leave; the U.S. government, acknowledging responsibility for their uprooting, decided to absorb them into the American public. Few migrations have required as much cultural adjustment as that of the Hmong in their recent evacuation to the United States. Thus, immigration policy, in this instance, became a part of foreign and military policy.

The politicization and militarization of refugee policy, however, stopped at the U.S. border. Foreign policy considerations determined who would be admitted and when. Domestic considerations determined what happened to the refugees thereafter. Two factors largely shaped the resettlement policy which resulted. First, the federal government was concerned that the refugees not become an annoyance or burden to any community, since this might undermine public support for the foreign policies which resulted in the resettlement (Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy, 1981). The second factor was the weight of the traditional U.S. stand toward new entrants, which requires their acculturation and eventual assimilation.

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The result was a policy which attempted to quickly transform the Hmong individual from what he or she was--a member of a distant Asian hill tribe--into a socially integrated, English- speaking, self-supporting U.S. citizen (U.S. Congress, 1980). The Hmong were to be dispersed among the U.S. population, and enclaves were discouraged. Federal support for resettlement had a short, 18-month time limit. The schools, the nations' chosen instrument of acculturation, were called upon to bring about the cultural transformation. The resulting consequences proved to be disastrous for the Hmong.

Consequently, a case can be made for regarding the encounter between the Hmong and the U.S. educational system as a case study of the capacity of that system for accommodating differentness and for responding to the needs of who are, in a number of ways, the neediest students. The extreme case, which that of the Hmong admittedly is, can make the inherent failings and incapacities of the system visible.

The Hmong: Federal Intentions and Educational Reality

The Federal government's plan was for the Hmong to be integrated immediately into mainstream U.S. society (Barnes, 1977). The government provided financial support for eighteen months (shortened from the original thirty-six), after which, it assumed, the refugees would be able to fend for themselves in the U.S. labor market. The key to long-term adjustment was the public school system, which would turn out English-speaking Americans whose heritage would presumably be little hindrance in the drive for success in the new land of opportunity. This plan did not succeed. Though the refugees had little control over their fate, they soon found the means to defeat the plan in every particular--and simultaneously to take what steps they could to fulfill the needs not addressed by the Federal policy (U.S. Congress, 1980).

First, they clustered. Many communities lost their Hmongs while others sprouted Hmong neighborhoods. Then the Hmong, like other immigrants before them, set up community institutions which eased the burden of adjustment and provided a measure of familiarity in an otherwise wholly alien environment.

Second, they failed to conform. It was obviously impossible for the Hmong to live like their agrarian ancestors, but they seemed to have tried. The Hmong used every opportunity to use garden plots wherever they could

be found in the city, and in their windows a variety of potted herbs and spices could be seen. Less picturesquely, the Hmong adults remain largely illiterate, and few speak any language but that which they used in Laos.

As a result, the Hmong have failed to "make it" in their new urban U.S. home. Lacking any transferable job skills, they remain largely unemployed. Even the few who have found work are paid so little that they and their families are dependent on various forms of cash assistance. For all but a handful the U.S., so familiar to many of us is an utterly foreign, inscrutable, and in many ways terrifying environment (Morin, 1983; Kaufman, 1984).

Conclusions

The job of the schools was to find the means to reach across this gap and provide access to the larger society. The current state of the Hmong demonstrates that the schools have failed in this assigned mission. The schools did not even attempt to shore up the Hmong people's most important asset, which was the traditional Hmong culture. The attempt to provide a substitute culture, which would permit the Hmong to function in a society radically different from that which they had known before, robbed the Hmong of a home base. The Hmong needed an environment which had familiar and friendly features to permit them to relax and to prepare themselves for the next day's toil of adjustment. The Refugee Act of 1980 and its attempts to reshape the Hmong overnight so rapidly virtually assured their failure. Given their outlook, quite understandable in view of the history of immigrants, educators would have regarded as self-defeating any attempt to provide classes in Hmong, or otherwise to encourage Hmong directed learning. In fact, it would have been a powerful force for adjustment (Jacobs, 1987).

The schools failed to keep the Hmong adults enrolled. It is essential to lay the blame for this failure on the schools rather than on the Hmong. Given their level of distress, they would have made good use of means for improving their lot, if these had been really accessible and ethnically appropriate. Too often the curriculum they encountered was not at all suitable for illiterates, and certainly did not take into account the enormous cultural gap which was the Hmong's primary reality in this country. The schools were insensitive to the Hmong's poverty and consequential lack of choices. For example, the Hmong had no way to arrange for child care during the day. Because of the policy of dispersal, they could not pool their efforts. Their unfamiliarity with the language and with American customs coupled with their lack of financial resources, precluded their finding child

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care. The result was that women with small children attended fewer classes (Downing, Bruce and Olney, 1982).

While the schools were supposed to be preparing the Hmong for entry into the U.S. labor market, they were content to provide but a few links in what needed to be a long chain of preparatory events. The Hmong were not provided with that most basic asset, a sense of job or career they might want or aspire to. When the Hmong arrived in this country, they had no idea what sorts of jobs people had, let along which were feasible or most desirable or what had to be done by way of preparation.

The Hmong, more than other immigrants, required of the authorities an informed, comprehensive understanding of their needs and a sensitive, tolerant, and understanding response from the schools. They did not receive this and continue to endure isolation and deprivation as a result.

A better educational policy for refugees and other immigrants would require that authorities embrace a pluralistic vision of the U.S. society. Many educational policymakers are aware of this, but they continue to place into effect contrary policies. Ethnicity provides a cultural base for people of varied backgrounds and capacities, and there is little that could compensate for its loss.

Any number of specific policies follow in the wake of such a reorientation. The schools could train staff to "see" the local community through the eyes of the immigrant (Goldstein, 1987). Data-collection revealing the problems which immigrants face in their efforts to obtain jobs and job training make it possible to design educational programs that respond to the immigrant's actual needs. Similarly, educational authorities could adopt measures to encourage the development of institutions within the budding ethnic community.

Ironically, the federal government is, at the time of this writing, attempting to reverse some of its refugee policies and so repair some of the damage done. It is supporting the formation of "Mutual Assistance Associations" of and for Hmong who have, in defiance of government dispersal programs, clustered together. These MAAs are designed to help the Hmong provide for themselves what the government was unable to accomplish.

The schools are not social service agencies, and it is neither fair nor constructive to blame the schools for all the troubles of any group in need. It

is clear, nevertheless, that many of the most important problems faced by the Hmong refugees were created or left unsolved because of insensitivities inherent in the acculturation and assimilation goals of the public schools. In light of the experience of many generations of earlier immigrants, what has happened to the Hmong was perhaps predictable. It is also tragic, demonstrating that we have learned little from our mistakes of the past.

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